

THE JAPANESE HOKKU

Shortest Poems in the World

By STANHOPE SAMS

Truth is the marrow of style.—*Basho.*

JANE AUSTEN has left a delightful and fadeless portrait of herself as working with a fine brush "on a little bit, two inches wide, of ivory." It is thus that nearly all the Japanese artists work: painting an exquisitely delicate picture on a narrow *kakemono* that will be hung behind a single flower-stem; carving a grim, mysterious Buddha out of a few inches of ivory; writing a deathless poem in less than a score of syllables.

If we examine the little picture or carving or poem, we soon shall see that the Japanese artists do not work on this minute scale because their conceptions are small, but because their art is subtle—finished and fine. They have chosen these limitations deliberately, and have accepted an extreme brevity and compression as their supreme law of form. They have carried selection and exclusion to the farthest degree known in all art.

While extreme brevity is the most obvious characteristic of this form of Japanese poetry, I do not wish to be understood as holding the opinion that this is its greatest charm, nor that it is the foundation of its only claim to originality. The virginal originality of the Japanese poetry cannot, indeed, be questioned. While Japan has been, perhaps, the most reckless of borrowers, and never has hesitated to appropriate whatsoever alien things she found to her taste or suited to her needs, she has kept her poetry cloistered and chaste. It has not been crushed beneath the weight of "barbaric pearl and gold."

Japan borrowed her writing, half her language, and nearly all of her institutions, religions and civilizations; but her songs, at least, have come out of her own bosom. Even the Chinese traditions, which fetter all customs and learning in the Empire, have here no authority. Although Chinese words form the bulk of the language of business, of daily intercourse among the educated, and even of prose literature, they are outlawed in the demesne of song. While a few of the present-day writers are using Chinese words somewhat freely, as in the style known as the *shin-tai-shi* (new form poem), there are not, it has been asserted, a dozen foreign words in the entire range of the national poetry. The full significance of this will be appreciated if we remember what an encrustation of Romance words rests upon the poetry of England and America.

There are three extremely brief poetic forms in Japanese: the *tanka*, consisting of five lines that make thirty-one syllables; the *dodoitsu*, of four lines that make twenty-six syllables; and the *hokku*, of three lines. Of these the *hokku* is at once the briefest and the most popular. It has the twofold honor of being the shortest poetic form in all literature, and the true national poetry of its native land. Its music, fleeting as a wood-bird's melody, is heard wherever Japanese is spoken. Its great popularity is due, perhaps, to the ease with which the little poems are written, remembered, quoted and applied to almost every incident or sentiment.

Every Japanese carries a sheaf of them in his memory, each one embodying for him and for all of his countrymen and countrywomen the spirit of some familiar and beloved scene in Nippon, the climax of some heroic action, the soul of some great or beautiful passion. The seventeen syllables of the *hokku* have expressed in immortal verse every emotion known to the Japanese heart, and every aspiration and every glory of the Empire. This



These Little Poems Often Are Attached to Boughs Laden With Blossoms

original. There is neither rime nor rhythm, neither accent nor stress. The *hokku* is read with a slight recitative effect, an almost imperceptible rise on the first and second lines, and a decided fall on the last line. The Japanese find the poetry in whatever rhythmic effect lies in a fixed number of syllables, in the truthfulness and beauty of the image or

thought, and in the exquisite choice of words—inevitableness of epithet and phrase. Keat wrote that all that was necessary for the singer to know was that "beauty is truth, truth beauty." But Basho anticipated his thought, in the phrase, "Truth is the marrow of style," by more than two centuries.

So fine, so subtle, is the spirit of Japan, that brevity may be said to be a Japanese invention. Each *hokku* must paint a single picture, make a single comparison or contrast, express a single thought or sentiment, or give utterance to a solitary cry of pain or joy or exaltation, or imprison some hauntingly beautiful suggestion. These little poems often are written on small slips of paper, and attached to the boughs laden with white cherry or plum-blossoms, or with the red autumn-leaves (*momiji*); and those who come to "view" the flowers and the leaves may also read the poems. Like chary nature, they limit themselves to a single bird-melody or to a single flower-hue.

Here is a simple miniature by the master-hand of Basho, greatest of *hokku* writers and the promulgator of its laws:

*Chimaki yuu
Kata-de ni hasamu
Hitai-gami.*—

(She wraps up rice-cakes, while with one hand she restrains the hair upon her brow.)

Another famous *hokku*, by Yamazaki Sokan, presents to the imagination a picture that suggests the "water-fowl" of Bryant—

*Darkly painted on the crimson sky,
Thy figure floats along:*

*Koe nakuba
Sagi koso yuki no
Hito-tsurane.*—

(But for its voice, the heron were only a line of snow.)

The Japanese, who often call Nippon "The Land of the Dragon-fly," have written thousands of *hokku* to this beautiful insect, which they name *tombo*. I give a favorite:

*Tombo no
Mo ya iri-hi no
Issakai.*—

(Dance, O Dragon-fly, in your world of the setting sun!) This little poem is remarkable for its construction, as well as for its cherished beauty. In every line there are one or two contracted syllables, reducing the rugged curtness of the *hokku* by four syllables, or making only thirteen in all, instead of seventeen.

The mysterious note of the cuckoo has stirred every poetic nature, and to an ancient Japanese poet, as to Wordsworth, the coy singer was

*No bird, but an invisible thing,
A voice, a mystery.*

The Japanese, hearing the cuckoo's note amid the deep silence of the evening, has this quaint fancy:

*Hito koe wa!
Tsuki ga natta ka?
Hototogisu!*—

(A solitary cry! Is it possible that the moon sang? Ah the cuckoo!)

All of Wordsworth's beautiful poem, many times longer than this tiny gem, is held in germ in these few syllables.

The Japanese themselves doubtless prefer those *hokku* that present to the imagination or to the

mere breath of song is the chosen vehicle of expression of the greater and of the lesser poets. Emperors and nobles, statesmen and warriors, the learned and the illiterate, and of course friends and lovers, all have found solace or exaltation in "the melody of this small lute." The composition of *hokku* is considered a necessary accomplishment—one of the primal and essential graces of life. If a beautiful image or thought arises in the mind, the Japanese strives to seize its precise spirit, its very soul, and to imprison it in a *hokku*. The *hokku* is the song of Japan. Has any other poetic form in all literature had such exalted honor?

Tennyson speaks of "jewels five-words-long," but he required many more than five words to fashion the gem in which this beautiful phrase occurs. Yet Basho was able to express the same idea in two words. Tennyson's full thought is:

*Jewels five-words-long
That on the stretched forefinger of all time
Sparkle forever.*

The immortal phrase of Basho, which is too replete with meaning to be shut within the compass of a short English sentence, is: *fu-eki ryu-ko*. The meaning is that, in order to be literature, the subject-matter must be of enduring interest, and the style must be that best suited to the age in which it is written.

The poetess Chiyo wrote an exquisite *hokku*, perhaps the most familiar to foreigners of all Japanese poems, in exactly five words:

*Asagao ni
Tsurube torarete
Morai-midzu.*—

(The morning-glory has seized my well-bucket. Gift-water!)

Sir Edwin Arnold, the diffuse, used forty English words to translate these five Japanese, or eight for one:

*The morning-glory
Her leaves and bells has bound
My bucket-handle round.
I could not break the bands
Of those soft hands.
The bucket and the well to her I left;
Give me some water, for I come bereft.*

Some brief explanation of the principal characteristics of Japanese poetry may help to a better appreciation of the few poems I shall cite in the

